

## 'I've Been Contributing': Undocumented Workers Are Key to California's Economy. A New Bill Would Give Them Unemployment Benefits

Several hundred demonstrators from around California converged Thursday at the state's Capitol in support of a bill that would offer income assistance to workers who are excluded from unemployment insurance benefits because of their immigration status.

The "Safety Net for All Day of Action," as dubbed by organizers, comes a month after a disastrous flood submerged vast expanses of berry and lettuce farmlands on the Central Coast and left thousands of local agricultural workers — many of them undocumented — facing the prospect of no income for months.

As more natural disasters like this winter's atmospheric-river fueled storms are expected to disrupt jobs, supporters of SB 227 say it's urgent for the state of California to fund an economic safety net for laid-off undocumented residents — instead of leaving nonprofits scrambling after every emergency to offer cash aid.

"That's just not a feasible solution, where we have over a million undocumented workers in the state," said Kim Ouillette, attorney with Legal Aid at Work, an organization that is part of the Safety Net for All Coalition.

"Realizing that reality, it can't just be left to piecemeal charity," she said. "The state has an obligation to ensure that there's a system in place that protects California workers that are major parts of significant industries."

An estimated 1.1 million unauthorized immigrants labor in California, particularly in low-wage jobs in agriculture, construction, retail trade and food services. In agriculture, half of the state's crop workforce lacks employment authorization, as estimated by the U.S. Department of Labor.

California's unemployment insurance system is funded in part with dollars from the federal government (PDF), which renders unauthorized immigrants ineligible for those benefits. However, the employers of those immigrants pay tax contributions to that same system — hundreds of millions of dollars each year — on their behalf (PDF), according to estimates by the UC Merced Community and Labor Center.

SB 227 would direct the Employment Development Department, or EDD, to create an "Excluded Workers Program" offering eligible individuals \$300 dollars weekly for up to 20 weeks, with funds that would come from state coffers only.

Under the bill, California residents would be eligible for the benefits if they performed at least 93 hours of work or earned \$1,300 or more in gross wages over the course of three months during the year before their application. That cash assistance would become available at the

earliest by Jan. 1, 2025, and end by the start of 2027, according to the measure by Los Angeles state Sen. Maria Elena Durazo.

Advocates and workers pushing for the bill said they started organizing at the start of the pandemic, when the safety net gap became increasingly evident as undocumented residents in hard-hit industries lost income but were unable to access the unemployment benefits other workers had.

"It's not fair. I've been contributing to the state," said Luis Mejia, who has worked in California for 13 years. "We need the governor to sign this law proposal."

The 54-year-old car wash worker said losing his income for months during the pandemic — with no jobless benefits to rely on — was incredibly stressful. He fell hopelessly behind on rent and couldn't send money to his two daughters in El Salvador.

"Those were moments that I would not wish on anyone else," said Mejia, one of numerous Bay Area residents who woke up before dawn to ride a bus from San Francisco's Civic Center to Sacramento with the organization Trabajadores Unidos Workers United. "That's why I'm taking measures so that on this trip to Sacramento, we tell Mr. Gavin Newsom that we are here. We are still in this fight."

The Legislature passed a similar bill last year, but Gov. Newsom vetoed it (PDF), citing fiscal concerns. Those objections could be magnified this year, as the state faces a huge budget shortfall. While the administration projected the deficit at \$22.5 billion, it could be about \$7 billion larger, according to a report last month by the Legislative Analyst's Office.

Still, supporters of SB 227, which has become a top issue for the California Latino Legislative Caucus, argue that it's a question of basic equity and justice. Unauthorized immigrants pay significant state and local taxes annually, to the tune of \$3.72 billion in 2019, researchers at the University of Southern California's Equity Research Institute found.

"Where there's a will, there's a way," said Assembly Majority Leader Eloise Gómez Reyes at a budget subcommittee hearing on the proposal last month. "They have been paying into the system, their employers have been paying their part of it. Yet none of those workers receive any of the benefits."

During the march near the Capitol, a crowd of hundreds of people who had traversed the state from the Coachella Valley, Fresno and other regions, filled the sidewalks. An accompanying band played corridos and cumbias.

*Article continues at link below*

Region	March 2022	February 2023	March 2023	Percentage Point Change	
				1 month	12 months
San José–Sunnyvale MSA	2.9%	3.2%	3.3%	+ 0.1	+ 0.4
San Francisco MD	2.7%	2.9%	2.9%	0.0	+ 0.2
California	4.5%	4.8%	4.8%	0.0	+ 0.3
United States	3.8%	3.9%	3.6%	- 0.3	- 0.2

Sector — March 2023	San Jose MSA	San Francisco MD	Combined Region	Percentage Change (Combined Region)	
				1 month	12 months
<b>Total Nonfarm</b>	<b>1,176,100</b>	<b>1,198,600</b>	<b>2,374,700</b>	<b>+ 0.3%</b>	<b>+ 3.2%</b>
Construction	54,200	40,500	94,700	- 1.7%	+ 1.8%
Manufacturing	180,700	38,900	219,600	+ 0.1%	+ 3.0%
Retail Trade	72,900	65,600	138,500	- 0.7%	- 0.6%
Information	105,000	123,700	228,700	+ 0.2%	- 0.5%
Professional & Business Services	254,800	311,600	566,400	- 0.6%	+ 2.8%
Education	95,800	86,000	181,800	+ 1.3%	+ 3.6%
Health Care & Social Assistance	144,900	126,800	271,700	+ 0.9%	+ 4.3%
Leisure & Hospitality	103,200	123,600	226,800	+ 2.9%	+ 14.3%
Government	98,000	138,000	236,000	+ 1.1	+ 0.6%

Note: San José MSA (San José-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara Metropolitan Statistical Area) = Santa Clara and San Benito Counties  
 San Francisco MD (San Francisco-Redwood City-South San Francisco Metropolitan Division) = San Mateo and San Francisco Counties

Source: California Employment Development Department, LMID

Jurisdiction	Labor Force			Unemployment			Unemployment Rate		
	March 2022	March 2023	Change	March 2022	March 2023	Change	March 2022	March 2023	Change
• San Mateo County	451,600	459,900	+ 1.8%	11,700	12,700	+ 8.5%	2.6%	2.8%	+ 0.2
• Santa Clara County	1,035,100	1,059,800	+ 2.4%	29,100	33,500	+ 15.1%	2.8%	3.2%	+ 0.4
Cupertino	28,900	29,700	+ 2.8%	700	900	+ 28.6%	2.4%	3.1%	+ 0.7
Los Altos	14,600	15,000	+ 2.7%	400	500	+ 25.0%	2.4%	3.1%	+ 0.7
Milpitas	40,600	41,700	+ 2.7%	1,200	1,400	+ 16.7%	2.8%	3.5%	+ 0.7
Mountain View	50,700	51,900	+ 2.4%	1,000	1,300	+ 30.0%	2.1%	2.5%	+ 0.4
Palo Alto	35,900	36,800	+ 2.5%	800	900	+ 12.5%	2.1%	2.6%	+ 0.5
Santa Clara	72,500	74,300	+ 2.5%	1,800	2,200	+ 22.2%	2.5%	2.9%	+ 0.4
Sunnyvale	86,900	89,100	+ 2.5%	2,000	2,400	+ 20.0%	2.3%	2.7%	+ 0.4
NOVAworks Region	781,700	798,400	+ 2.1%	19,600	22,300	+ 13.8%	2.5%	2.8%	+ 0.3

Note: NOVAworks Region consists of seven cities in Northern Santa Clara County and the entirety of San Mateo County

Source: California Employment Development Department, LMID

Company	Location	# Affected
<p><i>Due to an abnormally high number of WARNs for the month of March, the individual WARN details cannot be listed here.</i></p>		
Layoff events:		<b>62</b>
Individuals affected:		<b>2,006</b>

**WARN SUMMARY**

Events YTD<sup>†</sup>: **107**

Individuals Affected YTD<sup>†</sup>: **5,858**

Individuals Previous YTD<sup>‡</sup>: **594**

\* **WARN: Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification** (notice of mass layoff or closure)

<sup>†</sup> **YTD: Year to Date** (Calendar year: January 1–Present)

<sup>‡</sup> **Previous YTD:** (Same date range as YTD, one year prior)

Note: Layoff data are preliminary and should be considered an estimate of monthly regional activity

Source: California EDD, CalJOBS: WARN Data